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The Quest for Parity

John E. Jacob

COMMENTARY

The Quest for Parity

By John E. Jacob

One hundred and twenty three years ago, Howard was chartered as a university. Not a normal school for teacher training. Not a theological seminary. Not even a college. But a university.

The year was 1867. Most African Americans had been free people for only four years, and the Civil War wasn't history — it was a contemporary event that ended just two years before.

What an extraordinary act of courage and foresight for a band of courageous, enlightened people to establish a university that would educate the leaders of a people forcibly torn from their native lands and kept in chains for more than two hundred years.

On the occasion of Howard's 100th anniversary, President James Nabrit wrote:

"The very creation of the University was an act of faith in the idea that not only are all men created equal, but also that they should have an equal opportunity to develop to their fullest capacities. The founders of this institution were possessed of the deep belief that slaves and the children of slaves could be educated in the same manner as all others, and that the advantages of higher education should be made available to all persons. . . ."

And President Nabrit pointed out that "In the racial and cultural diversity of its faculties and students, Howard has come to be representative of the world as it actually exists."

Those words are more true than ever in this fast-changing world of today, where Americans must learn to function in a world that's three-fourths non-white; a world in which cries of freedom are being heard and recognized from the Soviet Union to South Africa; a world in which racism can only be a form of suicide.

Parity means roughly equality between African Americans and the white majority . . . the same proportion of Blacks as whites have good jobs, have access to health care.

As we look at today's world, we see a stage that is being transformed by deep human longings for freedom and responsibility.

People are no longer willing to take orders from Big Brother. They're no longer afraid of his secret police. They're no longer willing to accept political and social systems that refuse to allow justice, fairness, and power-sharing.

Today's worldwide movement for justice has its roots in the African American civil rights struggle of the 1950s and the 1960s — a struggle that drew on Howard for troops and strategies, a struggle that overthrew our own home-grown brand of apartheid.

It shares with the American civil rights struggle the commitment to nonviolent change, and the insistence on full equality.

Today, even as other peoples are marching toward the elusive goal of freedom, African Americans must continue to struggle for parity.

We cannot be diverted by the gains we've made, but must look beyond personal comfort and ambition to the larger goal of winning parity in an open, pluralistic, integrated society.

It's not enough to elect an African American governor of Virginia, when half of all Black children grow up in poverty.

It's not enough to have African American corporate vice presidents, when Black unemployment rates are two-and-a-half times those for whites.

And it's not enough to have an African American secretary of Health and Human Services, when the Black male mortality rate in Harlem is higher than the mortality rate in Bangladesh.

It's important to have African Americans in key positions of power and influence. But in and of itself, it is not sufficient.

It indicates that America has come a long way and that opportunities exist. But we cannot confuse individual achievement with group parity.

What do I mean by parity?

Parity means roughly equality between African Americans and the white majority. Rough — because there always will be natural variations among people based on cultural factors or group predilections of one kind or another.

Parity, then, means that roughly the same proportion of Blacks as whites have good jobs, have access to health care and decent housing, complete high school and college, and enjoy broad equality in other key indicators of life.

It means that African Americans shouldn't have unemployment rates two-and-a-half times those for whites; that our life expectancy shouldn't be seven years shorter than those for whites; that the wealth of the typical

African American family shouldn't be only 10 percent of the typical white family's wealth.

Parity doesn't mean that white levels should come down to meet ours — but that Black levels should rise to those enjoyed by white citizens.

And we are very far from parity today.

The National Urban League has set a goal of parity by the year 2000. To measure how far we are from that goal, we conducted a research study that measured the distance between whites and Blacks in key areas of life — employment, health, housing, and other key indicators.

We found that it would take many years, even hundreds of years, to catch up in some areas. And in others, we found the trend lines moving backward so that at the current rates of change, there will never be parity.

We also developed a Racial Parity Index that pulls those numbers together. A Racial Parity Index would indicate absolute parity between the races.

In 1967, the Racial Parity Index was 51.2. In 1985, it was only 47.

We're moving backward because racism is moving forward . . . because the economy is changing . . . because drugs and crime are killing our best and brightest before they know that they're our best and brightest.

But we are not as far from parity as it seems. We are, in fact, approaching a window of opportunity that can transform the future of African Americans.

In the 1990s, America faces a demographic revolution, and an economic one.

Demographically, America is changing swiftly. More of its total population is composed of African Americans and other minorities.

The time is gone when America could throw away its African American population by relegating it to menial jobs and unemployment.

Economically, America is competing in a global marketplace in which technology has changed the nature of national prosperity. Yesterday, natural resources made a country wealthy; today, it's human resources — the brainpower of educated people capable of mastering new technologies and new ways of thinking.

We're competing with Japan, where 95 percent of its young people graduate from high school with technical skills and knowledge equivalent to American college sophomores.

But a fourth of American young people drop out of school and perhaps another fourth graduate with gross deficiencies in fundamental skills.

Japanese industries are teaching people to use statistical process controls in production. American industries are teaching people basic skills so they can read simple safety manuals.

America is coming to realize that it can't compete unless it makes maximum use of all of its people. More than four out of five entrants into the workforce in *this* decade will be women and minorities — the same groups left out in the past.

If we continue to allow minority children to grow up poor, to suffer bad health and housing conditions, to get inferior education, then America will become a second-class nation with a declining standard of living.

There is no way America can compete unless its long-neglected human resources are developed, because the people at the margin today will be the core of the workforce tomorrow.

That's why I say that we have a window of opportunity to reach parity — America can no longer afford the luxury of racism and discrimination.

The time is gone when America could throw away its African American population by relegating it to menial jobs and unemployment. It can't win the global economic competition without making full use of every single American.

There's another reason for my optimism. And that is the end of the Cold War.

There is no longer any justification for $300 billion military budgets . . . for $600 million planes . . . for multi-billion dollar Star Wars fantasies.

Top experts in defense policy say that we can safely cut the Pentagon's budget in half by the end of this decade — and the way events are moving so swiftly, we'll probably be able to do it a lot sooner.

That's the famous peace dividend we hear so much about.

National strength is no longer measured by how many nuclear warheads you have, but by how competitive you are in a global economy. So that peace dividend has to be invested in developing our human resources.

The peace dividend, therefore, opens up another window of opportunity for African Americans. If America uses it wisely, it can invest in the nation's economic future and, in the process, bring parity to our people.

The National Urban League recently proposed a policy that would secure those goals. We called for the peace dividend to be split between deficit reduction and an Urban Marshall Plan.

We support deficit reduction because the budget deficit is blocking growth. Bring it down and you get interest rates in the 4-5 percent range, which would lead to healthy economic growth and create jobs.

But at least a third of the peace dividend should be invested in an Urban Marshall Plan that invests in America's poor people and brings them into the mainstream.

An Urban Marshall Plan would renew our cities, develop our physical and human resources, and move people out of poverty.

It would fund innovative new programs in education, put our children on the track to excel in college, provide decent housing and health care, ensure job and skills training for the jobs of the future, and make equal opportunity a reality and not simply a goal.

I believe an Urban Marshall Plan is within our reach, and that means parity is within reach.

But while an Urban Marshall Plan is necessary, more is needed.

It's going to take a determined effort by all sectors of our society to eliminate barriers to equality. Most of all, it will take the efforts of African Americans.

We need to restore the values that enabled our forebears to survive the worst kind of oppression . . . the aspirations that enabled so many people from the humblest of circumstances to achieve . . . the determination to overcome and to triumph.

We need to make our communities drug-free . . . to make our communities crime-free . . . to instill a love of learning in our young people.

We need to take pride in our roots . . . to see our racial heritage as a source of pride and not use it as an excuse for failure.

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Receiving an honorary degree is always a moving experience, not because it helps to fill an empty place on the wall, but because it tells the recipient that his work has been appreciated, his efforts rewarded, his contributions noted.

And it is doubly moving for me to receive this honorary degree from Howard, because my life and this institution are deeply entwined.

I studied here — received my undergraduate degree in 1957 — my M.S.W. in 1963. My wife is an alumna of Howard, and we met right here on Howard's campus. My daughter received her undergraduate degree here, and I've served on its Board of Trustees since 1971.

So, Howard is a part of my life — a very important part. This institution helped shape me.

It took a poor, naive youngster from Houston's Third Ward and gave him the education, the skills, the knowledge, and the self-confidence to go into the world and contribute to his people and his society.

And the irony is that Howard entered my life by accident. Today's entering freshmen probably carefully considered various options and chose Howard based on its reputation, its excellence, and its strong traditions.

It was different for young people growing up in Houston's poorest district in the 1940s and 1950s. My family was so poor we couldn't even afford a whole-numbered address — our house was number 2513½ Pierce Avenue.

In my junior year at Jack Yates High School, I picked up a newspaper that reported the death of a gentleman named E.E. Worthing, who owned many rental properties in the Houston ghetto. Today he would be described as a slum landlord.

The story went on to say that Mr. Worthing, who was heartily hated by many people in the community, left $500,000 for scholarships for poor, bright Black students.

Well, I was poor, I was bright, and I was definitely Black. And when I read the story, I remembered my father's admonition that "the Lord works in mysterious ways" and said to myself: "College, here I come."

I won that scholarship, but Howard was not my first choice. I applied to Northwestern University because my math teacher at Jack Yates High had attended Northwestern and it was the only school I had heard mentioned more than a couple of times.

I was accepted and was prepared to go to Evanston, when the Lord once again moved in a mysterious way. It must have been in August, because I was on my lawn-watering job at the time . . . for one of my former teachers.

I was watering the lawn when he came out the door and asked me what I was doing about college. I told him I was going to Northwestern, and he said: "That's fine. But your scholarship money will only last you two years there. What are you going to do your last two years?"

I panicked. I knew there was no way in the world my family could come up with college money — it was all they could do

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to put food on the table.

And so when I went to work at the YWCA that evening I went to see a young social worker there named Geneva Bolton Johnson, who is now the national president of Family Services of America.

She heard me out and said: "Let me see what I can do." She sent a telegram to Howard telling them about me and Howard sent a telegram back saying to come to Washington.

And that's the story of how I got what I now realize is the biggest break in my life. When I came to Howard, it was only the second time I'd been out of the state of Texas — the first time was a weekend in Baton Rouge.

I arrived on the first train I had ever taken. I was so naive that when I came to the campus I noticed that all the houses on the way from the station were row houses and wrote home to tell my parents that everyone in Washington lived in an apartment.

I grew at Howard. Howard did not simply give me an equal opportunity for leadership, it gave me, and fellow students, *every* opportunity.

When I was a student here, we used to say that Harvard was the white Howard. Howard was — and remains — a center of excellence, a place of high standards. Its faculty and administration believed that Howard students were the best and should perform at the highest possible level.

They had confidence in us and, as a result, we had confidence in ourselves.

I grew up in a segregated environment, at a time when African Americans had few rights, and were under the heel of Jim Crow laws and regulations. And Howard, too, was a predominately Black environment.

But when I entered the military after graduation and had my first experience of living and functioning in a largely white environment, I found that I could have peer relationships with white people and excel in a white institutional structure.

And the reason I could do that was because Howard not only taught me that you had to be twice as good as others, but it *trained* me to be twice as good.

Howard, throughout its history, has taken bright young people with raw talent and ambition — many of whom were poor and ill-prepared — and transformed them, gave them direction, and enabled them to lead fulfilling lives and to be leaders of the community.

It seems to me that is the central mission of historically African American institutions of higher education, and it is one that Howard exemplifies.

When I first came to this campus, I was awed by the outstanding people who attended Howard and who taught here.

People like Charles H. Houston . . . Alain Locke . . . Kelly Miller . . . Kenneth Clark . . . Mordecai Johnson . . . Thurgood Marshall . . . Sterling Brown . . . John Hope Franklin . . . William Hastie . . . Charles Drew.

People like James Nabrit . . . Rayford Logan . . . Benjamin Mays . . . Howard Thurman — and so many, many others, too many to name, too many accomplishments to mention.

Giants walked the paths of this campus — giants who changed the course of history — giants who left their mark on America and on African Americans.

We cannot settle for becoming one of the exceptional few to climb to the top of a society that keeps African Americans down.

Rather, we must follow in the extraordinary tradition of this place and struggle to rise and to take with us our brothers and sisters. □

Above all, those of us blessed with the benefits of a Howard education need to recognize that along with that good fortune goes great responsibilities — responsibilities of leadership and responsibilities of excellence.

That is the Howard tradition, and it is a proud tradition.

I urge us to take as our creed the words spoken by a great leader — a man who spent 27 years in a South African jail — a man whose quiet dignity and love of mankind have inspired not just a country, nor just a continent, but the world.

In 1964, Nelson Mandela was tried for the crime of treason, defined as advocating equality for Black and white South Africans.

What he told that kangaroo court is a message that still lives, a message we must take to heart, a message we must live, as he lived it.

Nelson Mandela said:

"During my lifetime, I have dedicated my life to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for, and to see realized. But, my lord, if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."

Let his credo be our credo. Let us carry that vision of justice and fairness, of racial equality, and not racial domination. □

John E. Jacob, president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League, is chairman of the Board of Trustees of Howard University. The above and accompanying piece titled "O Howard" were excerpted from his Charter Day Convocation address on March 2. At the convocation, he received an honorary doctor of laws from his alma mater.